

Community Research and Outreach Summary

Purpose

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) conducted research and community outreach to engage and learn from customers and community members as part of the 2021-2026 Strategic Business Plan (plan) process.

Insights gleaned will help the utility better understand customer and community perspectives and plan for the future. More specifically, this work will inform content and language in the plan, ongoing SPU service delivery, and engagement with customers and the community.

The research and outreach process had several important, defining characteristics:

- **Purposeful and respectful of people’s time and opinions:** Community members and customers are often asked to share their opinions, but rarely know how their feedback is used (if at all). To demonstrate respect for people’s time and input, research and outreach tools were kept brief and made accessible.
- **Inclusive:** Recognizing that typical research and public input tools often underrepresent segments of the population, SPU made a deliberate effort to be inclusive in its outreach. The Environmental Justice and Service Equity Division, with the help of Department of Neighborhoods community liaisons, took purposeful steps to better reach historically underserved and non-English speaking communities.
- **Multi-pronged:** Customers, community members, businesses, and SPU employees had multiple opportunities to provide input: through the careful ‘mining’ of existing research, business interviews, an online survey, hard copy/translated surveys, the SPU website, social media, meetings with community leaders, and interaction at events.
- **Efficient and adaptive:** The research and engagement teams were mindful of utility and community investments (time, resources, and focus) and made sure outreach was strategic, concise, convenient, and valuable. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, outreach efforts had to adapt to changing circumstances.

About this Summary

This is a high-level summary of the research and outreach effort. Detailed reports are available describing each component in more detail.

Overview

Research and outreach included four distinct efforts: background research (Voice of the Customer research), interviews with businesses, an online survey, and community outreach¹.



Voice of the Customer Research

Voice of the Customer research (VOC) is a comprehensive review of 28 research studies commissioned by SPU and others to better understand residential and business customer experiences, opinions, and preferences as well as employee perspectives. Source material included Seattle and regional surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The VOC research ‘mined’ the voluminous body of existing research to extract strategic information that would benefit the strategic planning process. A priority was placed on understanding customer satisfaction and examining whether the utility’s goals and values align with that of SPU customers.

The VOC work was foundational and led to the utility identifying five key questions for further study:

1. How satisfied are you with SPU services (drinking water; garbage; recycling and composting; sewer; and drainage and flood prevention)?
2. How satisfied are you with the overall cost and value of SPU services?
3. What improvements would you like SPU to focus on in the next five years?
4. What are the biggest water and waste management challenges facing Seattle in the next 20 years?
5. How can we work together to address these challenges?

These key questions were explored through business interviews, an online survey of employees and the public, and community outreach.

¹ In addition to these components, extensive employee engagement also took place. While employee perspectives were captured through Voice of the Customer (VOC) and survey research efforts, additional details about engagement efforts (e.g., workshops) are reported separately.

Business Interviews

SPU commissioned a strategic communications and research firm (Cocker Fennessy) to conduct confidential interviews with business leaders representing a range of industries, and business sizes and sectors. Cocker Fennessy worked closely with SPU to develop the qualitative research approach and identify and refine the interviewee list and discussion guide. Cocker Fennessy's research staff conducted the confidential interviews from November 15 to December 12, 2019. The interviews revealed business perspectives and experiences, filled knowledge gaps, and identified potential areas for partnership and improvement. Interviews were 45 to 60 minutes long and were conducted over the phone or in-person, depending on respondents' preferences. A total of 34 businesses were invited to participate in the research and 19 interviews were completed.

Survey

SPU also partnered with Cocker Fennessy to develop, implement, and analyze a brief online survey to better understand customer and employee opinions regarding SPU services, areas of improvement, challenges, and partnership opportunities. The survey was programmed and hosted via SurveyMonkey and fielded December 3, 2019 to April 15, 2020. People were invited to answer the survey through a variety of channels (SPU website; emails; e-news; social media including Facebook and Next Door²; and through partnerships with community groups and Department of Neighborhoods liaisons). The primary mode of data collection was an online survey (in English). Translated copies of the survey were made available in Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Somali. In person and paper responses to the survey are captured in the 'community outreach' report. In total, 944 people responded to the online survey.

Community Outreach

SPU prioritizes and values hearing all community voices. Building lasting relationships and creating authentic, quality opportunities for communication with communities is critical to our shared success.

The community engagement conducted in support of the plan gathered public input and engaged historically underrepresented and often underserved populations. SPU's Environmental Justice and Service Equity Division (EJSE) led the community engagement work and partnered with Department of Neighborhoods liaisons for implementation. Community outreach was inclusive and conducted through the promotion of the online (and hard copy) survey; administration of surveys in Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Somali; connecting with people through trusted community liaisons; interviews with community leaders; and meeting people where they are by visiting community centers, events, markets, social media, etc.

Through this outreach, SPU achieved: 40 community interviews with diverse communities, 82,378 Facebook impressions, and more than 944 completed surveys.

² Promoted the survey in 213 neighborhoods on NextDoor with 206,722 verified residents.

Key Themes and Findings

Component	Description	Key Themes/Findings
Voice of the Customer Research	Comprehensive review of research studies commissioned by SPU and others to better understand residential and business customer experiences, opinions, and preferences as well as employee perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High satisfaction with SPU services and desire for continued investment in services and infrastructure. • Affordability of rates, rate predictability, cutting costs, and finding efficiencies are concerns. • Finding technologies to improve service, costs, and safety are highly important. • Environmental leadership is a regional value and source of pride. • Addressing climate change is strongly supported but customers don't know SPU's role. • People need help understanding how to recycle and compost. Addressing the root causes of waste is also desired. • Economic opportunity and environmental health are not universal experiences. Reaching traditionally underserved communities will require intention, in-language communication, cultural relevancy, and authentic partnerships. • Residents and city employees believe ending racial inequity is a government responsibility that must be prioritized. • Businesses appreciate opportunities to save money and desire streamlined processes and communication. • Developers/businesses need to receive tangible benefits from green approaches and desire partnerships over enforcement. • There's an opportunity to reach people by focusing on how we can work together to sustain this special place.
Business Interviews	Conducted 19 confidential interviews with business leaders representing a range of industries, and business sizes and sectors to gather input on issues pertinent to the plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview recruitment was challenging—many lacked a relationship with SPU or belief that engagement would benefit them. • SPU is primarily seen as a service provider. Some also see the utility as a policy-setter and enforcer. • SPU is credited with providing safe, high quality, and reliable drinking water. Feelings about drainage and sewer were more mixed. • Feedback on garbage/waste was more critical. Issues with contractors were mentioned. • Illegal dumping and graffiti are problematic in some neighborhoods and mentioned frequently by Business Improvement Area interviewees. • Many feel SPU is easier to work with once you have a personal relationship with a staff person. • Business and community engagement could be improved through regular and early communication, particularly on policy issues. • Effective partnerships require understanding, relationship building, and flexibility.
Community Outreach	Gathered public input and engaged historically underrepresented and often underserved populations on SPU's 5 key questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High awareness/appreciation of water service. • Concerns about drainage and flooding and waste services. • Identified barriers to effective engagement (trust, language, awareness/knowledge). • Strong concerns about affordability. • Recognition of significant future challenges (growth, climate, infrastructure). • Need for improvements around community engagement and communications.
Online Survey	Fielded a broad-based online survey of customers and employees to inform the plan, ongoing service delivery, and customer engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SPU services (water, drainage and wastewater, and solid waste) are viewed as essential and are valued. • All SPU services are favorably rated; but water receives the highest ratings. • Significant 'neutral' responses to questions about the utility and its services are areas for additional exploration. • Respondents would most like to see SPU focus on aging infrastructure, affordability, service equity, and waste/plastics/toxics. • The top challenges for the utility are sustainable waste practices, aging infrastructure, climate change, and population growth. • Outreach could be improved through better/simple communications, education, equity, translations, and more community engagement.

Considerations and Opportunities

The insights gleaned from plan research and outreach raise some issues for further consideration and potential opportunity areas. Specifically:

1. How can we ensure that insights from outreach and research are shared effectively within the utility and used to inform service delivery and future outreach?
2. How can we close the feedback loop with the community, sharing results of this and other research and outreach?
3. Are there opportunities to receive more focused input (e.g., COVID-19 recovery opportunities) during the extended planning period?
4. How can research and outreach be coordinated across SPU's lines of business to minimize fatigue/lack of participation? Should we create community or consumer opt-in lists to regularly check in with our customer-owners? Are there internal SPU processes that could be developed to ensure better coordination?
5. What are SPU's goals for building relationships with different customer types? What is SPU willing/able to do to build truly effective relationships and partnerships?
6. What will future SPU research and outreach look like as we recover from the pandemic? Even with vaccinations, recurrences are likely and ongoing physical distancing practices may be required. How can we adapt to the new normal?

Additional Resources

The following detailed research and outreach summaries are available:

- Voice of the Customer Research Report (November 2019)
 - VOC Themes Presentation/Summary (November 2019)
- Business Interview Report (January 2020)
- Community Outreach Report (May 2020)
 - Facebook Ad Recap Review
- Online Survey Report (May 2020)
 - Survey Data File with Verbatim Responses
 - Facebook Ad Recap Review
- Employee/workshop material/summaries